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## The Villas

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## THE VILLAS

*Dorothy J. Zellmer*

Giant green letters bordered in gold magnified smaller letters within them, illuminating VILLAS from a weather-beaten marquee on a bleak, red building. While other people went to the theatre, in the late 1940's and early 50's, I went to "the show."

A cramped booth, much like a carnival-ticket seller's, housed a sour-faced woman who took the money and poked at a flat metal button all afternoon. Cardboard tickets shot out from an automatic slide dispenser.

Incredible life-sized billboards plastered the red-brick walls to the right and left of the ticket booth. Smudged and cracked, they promised comedy, disaster, intrigue, love, music, and violence — for only 50¢.

Double-width glass doors secured by a wooden wedge, kicked in at the bottom, invited me into the interior. I hurried up the frazzled, faded carpeting and eagerly sniffed the faintly burned popcorn which teased at my nose. Bobbling and flicking inside the hot glass chamber, the popcorn whirled from the metal inner chamber, surrendering to an ultimate salty bath: Yellowish-white high fiber with lots of cholesterol housed in a cone-shaped box, for about 15¢.

A blonde tossed-haired usher snapped my ticket in half and jabbed the ticket stub into my hand. In his gold braided uniform, he reminded me of an organ grinder's monkey, less cap.

Once past him, I feasted my eyes on pyramids of imprisoned candies in a three-layered concession stand and hungrily selected one candy bar, with just enough money left for a large box of popcorn with globs of melted butter drooling over the top and down the sides of the box.

I pushed my shape through a vinyl-padded door and scooted, half recklessly in semi-darkness down the narrow red-carpeted aisle. Squinting my eyes, I focused on rows of escalated seats from front to back in a box-shaped room neatly divided into three sections, the center of which was twice the width of the other two. Steel service doors on the outer walls screamed EXIT in flaming letters.

Plaster medallions with knobs like all-seeing eyes glowered at the unwary humans from their sooty ceiling. Across an old varnished wooden stage, the immortal movie screen shot straight up to the ceiling. Velvet crimson drapes hugged the sides of the screen and canopied over its top edge. If I were ever in a tomb, it certainly must smell like this; moldy-musty and clinging like mildew.





Squirming into an almost vacant row of seats, I proceeded to plump down on scratchy mohair — but not before I swiped the seat for any gummy residue left over by the previous tenant. The soles of my shoes stuck to the clammy concrete, which was bitter cold, winter or summer. I fidgeted a good ten minutes, wiggling into position while kids around me jeered, whistled, and hooted, anxious for some eye-popping entertainment. I munched on my soggy, rubbery popcorn and the salt stung my tongue; no money left for a Coke.

The sound-warped projector shattered my senses as it rolled images over my head in dusty profusion. The balcony was immediately beneath that projector. Dared I go upstairs to watch the necking? My conscience warned me otherwise.

Short subjects included the current news followed by jerky animations of Woody Woodpecker, Daffy Duck, or Porky Pig. Of course, I never missed the weekly serial with its numerous sequels of Flash Gordon. To introduce the main course, the MGM lion roared, or the RKO Broadcasting tower clicked, or Paramount's majestic mountain peaked. I tried to ignore the slurred comments from the smart alecks who kicked a rhythmic beat under my seat, or the fat guy whose elbow was bruising my ribcage.

I split with laughter at Laurel and Hardy, or Bud Abbott and Lou Costello. My heart literally left my chest with Humphrey Bogart and Peter Lorre, or Basil Rathbone and Dr. Watson in the Sherlock Holmes capers. I stiffened with fear, peeking through the spaces of my fingers at *Frankenstein* or *The Mummy's Curse*. *Bambi* and *Lassie Come Home* made my nose and eyes dribble, while *The Ten Commandments* soared my mind into spectacular entities of passion and sin.

Carmen Miranda and Ethel Smith indelibly etched Latin into my musical soul, and *Fantasia* captured me forever.

Completely done in by one matinee, I hated to disconnect my moist bottom to join the packed aisles of punky kids who wanted only one thing — OUT.

My mind had been blown to smithereens. My eardrums were violated. My vision would never be the same again; stone-blinded by the brilliance of vibrant Technicolor on wide screen. My taste buds were ruined by sweets and scorched by salt, and I could hardly stand to wait until the next Saturday afternoon when it was show-time again.